The Vots

In Votsboro, the legacy of the Vot family is older than the dirt that the city was founded on. The clan built the original settlement at the head of the Quill Pen River, and they've lived by the water ever since. There must be something in that water, though, because none of them have aged a day in twenty years.

Mama Vot is like a cryptid. In high school, I never arrived early enough to get a good glimpse of her as she came in to work. She worked in an office block at the center of the building, off-limits to students. Was she an accountant? A switchboard operator? Did she torture the kids who got expelled? No one knew for sure, but the rumor mill kept the theories coming.

Votsboro knew her children all too well, though—all seven of them. Ranging from the ages of four to eighteen, they had grown up with the town's Gen X crowd. Then they just. . . stopped growing one day. I have been a peer to each of them at some point.

In preschool, I played with permanent four-year-old Avery. She had a gap in her front teeth, black, wiry hair, and skin like coffee with the smallest splash of milk added. She was my only friend at the time because she kept me to herself. Whenever another kid would get too close to me on the playground or talk to me for too long, Avery would cry:
"MY Ellie!" During indoor playtime, she loved to move us to a corner and build a castle of blocks around us.

Avery threw a fit on my fifth birthday, and things have never been the same between us since. When strangers saw us interact—which we did from time to time as I came of age—they tended to assume that she was merely a grumpy tyke who refused to talk to me for arbitrary, infantile reasons, but those who knew our history knew better.

I met Dezmond during a school field trip to the museum. Being a couple of bored seven-year-olds, we gravitated toward one another, and we spent the entirety of that day whispering snide remarks back and forth. Dez has a lighter complexion than Avery, a flexible face capable of the most cartoonish expressions, and a helmet-sized afro like a comical sidekick in a tween sitcom. Everything was a joke to him.

"If everything is funny," he once told me, "then nothing can hurt you enough to break your heart." When I graduated to age eight, I suspect that he was hurt, but he didn't show it. He merely found another class clown to latch onto.

Alicia was the kind of girl who wrote her name with the anarchy logo in lieu of the first *A*. I noticed her red-topped frohawk from across the cafeteria and decided to be a little daring. Together, we became quite the wild duo that year. . . at least as wild as a pair of decade-old schoolkids with bedtimes *can* be. She introduced me to my parents' least favorite bands, taught me how to play dumb when caught trespassing, and showed me techniques for creating eye-catching designs with spray paint.

"It's not vandalism if it makes the property *more* beautiful," she said.

For my eleventh birthday, my family and I went to a local waterpark. My parents treated the event as a baptism of sorts because they knew that I was free from the clutches of Alicia Vot. She wrote a bittersweet breakup song for me, burning it onto a disc and slipping the disc into my backpack while I was distracted (in true Alicia fashion). It's not the best song, but I love it to this day.

Every grade was its own little clique in Votsboro, so I went three full years without befriending another Vot. Then I almost cut my arm off in the second week of eighth grade woodshop (which is legal for some reason). The hand of Maggie Deb grabbed the safety grip and

prevented the circular saw from collapsing onto my forearm. She glowered at me like I was an idiot—because I had been an idiot on that day—but when our last-period class was canceled, she and I sat in the school courtyard and bonded over some ridiculously complicated math homework while we waited for our parents to arrive.

Maggie Deb sported waist-length hair. I remember it being wiry like Avery's. When in the woodshop, however, the older sister tied her hair into a tight bun and covered her scalp with a bandana, becoming a dark-skinned Rosie the Riveter. She disappeared for about two weeks leading up to my fifteenth birthday, and she emerged on my birthday eve with a wooden plaque. Engraved on the plaque was a math equation, the extra credit question that had been my saving grace on the final exam. She even reproduced my handwriting (from my notes) with the inscription.

"Stay safe, Eliot," Maggie Deb warned me before nearly suffocating me with a hug and climbing into her brother's truck.

About a year later, I had the pleasure of getting to know that same brother as my own comrade. Most people refer to male sixteen-year-olds as boys, but Big Gage Vot was a sixteen-year-old gorilla of a man. He used to be an outstanding fullback for the high school . . . until his four years of eligibility ran out twenty years ago. He is still enrolled in the high school, but he never attends class anymore.

Apparently, the school is not interested in granting diplomas to undead forever-teens, so Big Gage no longer bothers. He sticks around as chauffeur and moving man for the school. Very few times have I seen him without a steering wheel or a heavy object in his hands. The only small object I've every seen him hold is a paint roller. I caught him sitting crisscross in front of a

half-painted wall in the school cafeteria. I tried to cross the room without distracting him, but he stopped me with a random question:

"What does this color say to you?"

"Uhhh…." I stared dumbfounded at the orange wall partially covered with a half-coat of baby blue paint. "The color looks. . . peaceful, I guess."

"Good," said Gage. "The blue should hopefully create a tranquil atmosphere, but the hue is light enough that students won't be tempted to slip into a food coma during lunch. I like orange, but it's too campy and aggressively upbeat for a dining hall, almost mocking in a way. This shade of blue should help to create a more easygoing vibe." I took a seat beside him and got a good look at him for the first time.

Icy, blue eyes peered from his mocha face like a two-star constellation. A thunderhead beard obscured the lower half of his face. Intertwining dreadlocks leisurely stretched from his head to the tips of his shoulderblades. As he elaborated on the importance of balancing warm and cool colors, most of his impromptu lecture slipped into one ear and out of the other.

I sat there, slowly comprehending and basking in the revelation that Big Gage the Beast of Burden may have cared more about the school more than some honor students. Over the next week, he finished painting the cafeteria walls with a little help from me. He let me keep the last few ounces of the baby blue paint, saying, "You never know when you'll need some tranquility in your life." We never had a full conversation again after the paint job was finished, but Big Gage would still smile and wave at me when he saw me on campus or around town.

During my senior year of high school, the time came for me to face the music. When I accepted a position as the conductor's assistant for the school jazz ensemble, I only wanted to earn the volunteer hours I needed to graduate with honors; I got more than I bargained for.

Vot twins Hiram and Hugh were my anchors that year. Over the course of Christmas break, I managed to begin and end a relationship with the oboist. She wouldn't talk to me during our last semester, and the lack of closure was eating away at me. One day, after rehearsal, Hiram and Hugh held me hostage (sort of).

As I started to leave, Hiram blocked my path.

"We know you're not OK, Eliot. Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

"What's her name?" asked Hugh. For several seconds, I could only stare, my gaze alternating between the two brothers. Both twins possessed warm, hazel eyes and medium builds. Hiram rocked an undercut on his head and stubble—a blanket of fuzz that never vanished but never grew into a full beard—on his face. Hugh sported a handlebar mustache and a metalhead mullet, which he usually kept in a man bun.

I told them my tale of adolescent love and loss. Hugh, the less talkative of the two, laid his hand on my shoulder. The anxiety I had built up in recounting the story evaporated away; I could almost see steam rising from the gaps between Hugh's fingers.

"You're a cool guy," said Hiram, "and she's a cool girl, but not every coupling of cool people is necessarily meant to be, you know? Call your parents, and I'll let them know that you're spending the night at the Vots' place."

I made the call, and Hiram pitched the idea of a sleepover to my mom in the same way that a telemarketer would pitch a product. Before Hugh and I could schlep the quiet brother's drums into the percussion closet, Hiram called after us, declaring that he had closed the sale. He hoisted his bass guitar over his head in triumph and led the way to the parking lot.

From there, I followed the brothers Vot up the road that meanders beside the Quill Pen River until we reached their estate: Inkwell. The gated community contained the main Vot mansion, a few storage sheds, and two smaller houses. The brothers led me toward the latter. "One of them is for guests," Hiram explained, "and the other one is ours. Pop let us move into it so that we could have some freedom, but not *too* much."

We settled into the bachelor pad for the night, and we played video games (mostly racing games and tournament fighters) into the morning. We may not have finished *all* of our homework that night, but the therapy of fellowship was worth it—if only for that one occasion.

A few days before graduation, I received an e-mail from the patriarch himself: Gregory A. Vot.

"Please come visit the main mansion at Inkwell," read the text box. The brief message was followed by Papa Vot's cell phone number, and we arranged a meeting for the break of dawn on the morning of the graduation ceremony. (What can I say? I like to cram a ton of time commitments into the same day. Also, I have a difficult time sleeping the night before a major event.) At seven, convenience store coffee in hand, I stepped from my car into the Vots' driveway. The front door opened for me, and I took my cue to enter.

Lavender walls, ebony siding, and marble tabletops greeted me. I removed my shoes before treading on the gray shag carpet.

"I almost wouldn't mind being frozen in childhood if I lived here," I thought aloud to myself.

"That's the goal," a weary voice replied. Searching for the speaker, I scanned the mansion's living room until I spotted a shadow atop the stairs. Without another word, he turned and delved deeper into the upper-level hallway.

A knot formed in my gut, but my feet surged forward one after the other. I climbed the stairs and followed the shadow into his study. Not surprisingly, a collage of newspaper clippings hung on his wall. (Conspiracy theorists always collect newspapers.) Grainy photographs of crop circles dominated the center of the frame. Pictures of Papa Vot manipulating circuitry lined the perimeter of the frame.

As a speculator on the possibility of extraterrestrial life, Vot had drawn more than a few scoffs and eyerolls from the commoners and local government suits alike. As one of a handful of gifted engineers who brought Votsboro into the modern era, however, he curried a begrudging respect from all of them.

Vot's study was located directly under a gable in the roof. Beginning about five inches above my head, the ceiling slanted sharply. Opposite the newspaper collage, a cupboard with windows housed an assortment of books and audiotapes. Then, finally, my eyes landed on the man himself.

The old, world-weary black man sat on the deep sill of the study's only window. The dark, trimmed soul patch from the photographs had since grown into an Amish-style beard of steel wool. Vot wore a pair of khaki slacks, an untucked dress shirt, and no shoes or socks. *He's probably just beginning to prepare for the ceremony*, I figured. At last, the patriarch drew in a deep, labored breath, and he began to speak:

"Thank you for being their friend, Eliot Tsukamoto. I know it's not always easy to be seen with the town freaks."

"It's been worth it, sir," I replied, taking a seat on a nearby futon. "They've been good to me."

Vot stared at his feet for a long minute. Then, with a sigh, he broke the silence.

"I don't know you well personally," said the patriarch, "but I respect you too much to withhold the truth from you any longer." Vot lifted his foot to reveal a glowing, blue tattoo. I recognized on his sole the same pattern from the crop circles. "There's an electric fence built into the city's power grid. My colleagues and I designed it to keep the extraterrestrials out."

"Come again?" I asked.

"I don't expect you to believe me, but at least hear me out." I watched Vot's eyes shift from me to the floor as he weighed his next words. "The fence worked a little too well. We attracted some unwanted attention. Since our otherworldly friends could not breach our defenses, they tried to negotiate with us through a private radio frequency. Eventually. . . I was able to strike up a deal with them."

"WHAT?!" I cried. I shot to my feet, but the sudden rise, combined with Vot's revelation, made me light-headed, and I collapsed onto my seat again.

"Hiram and Hugh had just turned eighteen—for the first time—and I. . . realized that I wasn't ready to let them go. I wasn't ready to let *any* of my children go!" His breaths turned to heaving gasps. "I altered the frequency of the electric fence by an imperceptible degree, allowing the extraterrestrials to come and go as they pleased. In exchange, their physicians sedated us, and they surgically transformed us into . . . whatever we are now."

With a trembling voice, I launched a single-question interrogation at the modern Faustus: "How can you be OK with what you did?"

"I can't," answered the old man. "But it needed to be done. If you ever have a family of your own, Eliot, you will know the pain of drifting apart! Most people have either buried me in the past or grown to merely tolerate me. Miriam and the kids are all I have in terms of human connection."

"You're not even sure that they're human anymore," I corrected.

"THEY'RE THE CLOSEST THING I HAVE!" erupted the patriarch. He took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Sorry, kid," he said. "The extraterrestrials never told me their scheme, but their presence in this town is the reason for its so-called . . . 'paranormal activity.' Whenever you get the opportunity, I want you and your family to move to Cusp City. Its forcefield has not been compromised. I can't undo what I've done, but I can share the truth with those who are worthy of knowing it. In case we never meet again, Eliot Tsukamoto, just know that you are the best friend that any of them have ever had."

The rest of the day—including the graduation ceremony—was a blur I saw the Vot family in the audience, sitting toward the back of the auditorium, but none of them stuck around after the cap toss. The next morning, my parents received an ultimatum to leave Votsboro, complete with a check form Gregory A. Vot to cover expenses. Acting on the perceived threat, my parents relocated us to Cusp City.

I have not been back to Votsboro since. Hopefully, something has changed since I left. Maybe a friendlier race of aliens has defeated the extraterrestrials who cursed the town! I don't know! I just know that the Vot kids are good people at heart, and they deserved a better ending.